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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN SETS MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS FOR OCTOBER 6

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES JASON P. HYLAND PER 1.4(B,D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Azerbaijan's Central Election Commission (CEC) has announced that municipal elections will be held on October 6. Three types of elections will be held: re-run elections in the municipalities that participated in the 2004 elections in which the results were invalidated (141 municipalities), bi-elections in some municipalities, and new elections in municipalities that were established after the elections (23 municipalities). Elections will take place in more than 80 electoral constituencies, with a total of 942 polling stations. There are more than 1900 vacant seats, and an anticipated three to four candidates will run for each seat. CEC expects between 20 and 45 percent voter turn-out of the 800,000 voters registered in the participating municipalities, with greater turn-out predicted in small villages. The opposition Azadliq bloc will boycott the elections, although one Azadliq bloc member, the Popular Front Party (PFP), said that it will participate if the composition of the CEC is changed. After an internal debate, Musavat also decided to boycott the elections, but granted its members the right to run as independent candidates. Several of the small pro-opposition parties will participate in the elections. END SUMMARY

ELECTIONS LOGISTICS

¶2. (C) Azerbaijan's most recent municipal elections were held on December 17, 2004. The results were invalidated in 420 Precinct Elections Commissions (in a total of 141 municipalities) due to "errors affecting the electoral results," and 50 elections commissions were dismissed by the CEC due to "serious law violations." On June 27, the CEC announced that municipal elections would be held on October ¶16. Because there is no law requiring new municipal elections to be announced within a specific amount of time, the GOAJ until June 27 had not taken action on the canceled 2004 races. Anar Mammadli, the Executive Director of the Election Monitoring Center, said that the GOAJ finally set the date for the rerun elections in response to direct pressure from the Council of Europe.

¶3. (C) Mammadli explained to Poloff that the fall elections include three types of elections: repeat elections in the municipalities that participated in 2004 in which the results were invalidated (141 municipalities), bi-elections in some municipalities, and elections in new municipalities that were established after the 2004 elections (23 municipalities). Rovzat Gasimov, Head of the CEC's International Relations Department, briefed Poloff on preparations to-date. According to Gasimov, there will be 942 polling stations in more than 80 constituencies. There are more than 1900 vacant seats, and CEC expects three or four candidates to run for each seat. So far, 78 candidatures have been registered, 968 potential candidates have received signature sheets, and 110 have completed the campaign of signature collection and submitted the sheets.

GASIMOV'S INSIGHT

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4, (C) Gasimov told Poloff that the problem he sees with Municipal Elections is that there is a mentality among the population that anyone can run for a seat in the Municipal Councils. He said that this mentality used to exist for Presidential and Parliamentary elections, but that now the public realizes that it takes work to be the President or to be a Member of Parliament (MP). In fact, Gasimov admitted that the CEC hates municipal elections. He is optimistic, however, that more youth will participate, especially in large cities. He explained that in small villages, the elderly are more politically active. Gasimov estimates turn-out will be between 20 and 45 percent of the 800,000 voters that are registered in the participating municipalities. He predicted that overall turn-out will be much higher in small villages, where the focus will be on the municipal elections, and lower in big cities, where the elections are not expected to garner much attention.

THE OPPOSITION (MOSTLY) BOYCOTTS

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¶5. (C) Unsurprisingly, the opposition Azadliq bloc announced that because Azerbaijan failed to fulfill the Council of Europe's recommendations to improve the elections process, the bloc will boycott the municipal elections. The Popular Front Party, part of the Azadliq bloc, announced that it would participate in the municipal elections only if the composition of the CEC is changed. (COMMENT: We do not expect this to happen.) EMC's Anar Mammadli believes the PFP is posturing, trying to draw attention to itself in preparation

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for the high-profile Presidential elections in 2008. After weeks of internal wrangling, Musavat also announced its decision to boycott the elections, but has given party members the right to run as independent candidates. Musavat MP Nasib Nassibli admitted to Poloff that there had been an internal rift in the party - some members wanted to participate in the municipal elections while others did not. Several small pro-opposition parties will participate in the elections, including Civil Solidarity, Whole Azerbaijan Popular Front, Social Welfare, and Justice.

COMMENT

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¶6. (C) The decision of the leading opposition parties not to participate indicates that the October municipal elections are likely to attract many independent candidates but little attention from the general public. Musavat's decision not to participate comes as a surprise, particularly since all other recent evidence indicates that Musavat is deeply engaged in Azerbaijan's political process, including its own serious party-building efforts. The Embassy will continue to monitor and support the democratic process here and will work with other diplomatic missions to develop plans to observe the October 6 elections.

HYLAND